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Teachers, how does it feel to be oppressors?

A teacher literally stepped on children to “teach” them about slavery



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Column by **ANDRE PERRY**

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The New York Daily News [reported](#) on February 1 — the start of Black History Month — that a teacher in a majority-minority school in the Bronx, NY, instructed three black children in her seventh-grade class to lie on the floor during a lesson on slavery. Then she stepped on the students’ backs, allegedly to show them “how it feels to be a slave.” This was not the first time that Patricia Cummings, who is white, “taught” this module on the Middle Passage, when Africans were forcibly brought to America as part of the slave trade.

This is the first incident of its kind coming from the school. But the

same article also mentioned that in 2013, two teachers from Manhattan Public School 59 had incorporated the killing and whipping of slaves in a math lesson on subtraction and multiplication.

Cummings' slavery lesson wasn't only cruel; it was redundant. Black students already know what it's like to be dominated. Near Pittsburgh, Woodland Hills High School [Principal Kevin Murray was caught on video holding a student's head down](#), while a school resource officer (a police officer who is stationed in a school to provide security) Tased the child with a stun gun. Forcing students to walk along [lines painted on the floor](#) became an industry standard among charter management organizations in black districts until the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#) and the [U.S. Department of Justice](#) threatened to file lawsuits for [unnecessarily harsh discipline](#), among [other complaints](#). In addition, black districts are treated like black students. For instance, states' departments of education used the extreme tool of state takeover — when states take control of an entire school district — disproportionately against black districts. Consequently, black students quickly became familiar with strategies such as [firing black workforces](#).

Black students know too well what it's like to be humiliated, held in captivity and to suffer from inhumane conditions created by educators. Many compliant students who sit quietly accepting demeaning lessons like the ones administered by Cummings and others like her are viewed as obedient and law-abiding. Their counterparts who resist are



Students conduct a protest during at Franklin Field on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Photo: Hunter Martin/Getty Images

deemed disorderly and subjected to harsh disciplinary policies, often ending up in jail by way of the school-to-prison pipeline. Whether you are obedient or “woke” — conscious of your oppression — you are being oppressed in schools. Yep, black students already know what it’s like to be stepped on.

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You would think reading slave narratives and perspectives from the enslaved about the horror of being sold into slavery and held in captivity would encourage a connection with the past. [Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938](#), which was sponsored by the Library of Congress, is a great resource for teachers and students to learn from those who were enslaved — and who, by the way, were among the ancestors of the students. But I stand corrected. There are white teachers like Cummings who have not reckoned with what it means to oppress.

Cummings has since been reassigned away from children. The New York City education department should throw her out of the district, with assistance from the union. But firing one teacher won’t begin a reckoning among teachers of what it means to be an oppressor.

Teachers, ask yourself, what does it feel like to oppress? What emotional boost do you gain from tormenting black and brown youth with absurd “lessons” that scrutinize the enslaved and ignore the oppressors? And how has the institution of slavery affected attitudes of teachers today? The disproportionate use of suspension and [corporal punishment](#) against black kids reflects our socially ingrained perceptions. The belief that teachers ([and parents](#)) are justified in punishing black children in order for them to learn stems

from our racist past. Education can progress if teachers become more self-aware and cognizant of how they beat black children and their families down. Teachers, what do you get out of [blaming black parents for underachieving kids](#) and [shaming students](#) for their nappy hair and saggy pants? Ask yourself why you handle black kids in ways you would never treat your own children.

Colleges of education and teacher certification programs must do more to address the psychological bases of racism, patriarchy and white privilege. And yes (for those who are quick to add black teachers are racist too), black teachers must address internalized racism as well.

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There is evidence that racism is a psychological defense mechanism generated by feelings of insecurity and anxiety.

“Research has shown that when people are given reminders of their own mortality, they feel a sense of [anxiety](#) and insecurity, which they respond to by becoming more prone to status-seeking, [materialism](#), greed, [prejudice](#) and aggression,” [writes](#) psychologist Steven Taylor in the industry magazine *Psychology Today*. Insecurities can result in a destructive mindset that leads to a

projection of flaws and personal failings onto another group, as a strategy of avoiding responsibility and blame.


But clearly racism comes from more than widespread insecurities about mortality, greater than a kind of mid-life racial crisis. Racism is also a pathological pursuit of power that is offensive, purposeful and direct. Public Enemy was on to something when they recorded the classic album *Fear of a Black*

Planet. From this mindset, resources are to be taken, not shared. In this vein, racism protects against the dismantling of a false narratives of white superiority that justifies the hoarding of resources and the control of other people.

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Understanding patriarchy as a colonial expression to control others can also help explain how teachers have come to oppress people of color. These are the so-called educators who are complicit in white-washing blood-stained U.S. history. Instead of teaching about the genocide of indigenous tribes, they teach about taming “savage Native Americans.” Instead of teaching about armed resistance in the civil rights movement and revolutionary black leaders, they teach from texts that equate dignity with docility.

Educational systems have historically helped a small number of powerful men control resources and people. This is how they do it.



**From taming
“savage” Native
Americans to
creating docile
black workers,
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and people.**

Here’s a thought: What if more white teachers intentionally engaged with black and brown people in social contexts with the purpose of becoming anti-racist educators? Take [Derek Black](#), 27, a white nationalist who was groomed to follow in the footsteps of his father, a former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, but renounced those beliefs in college. Starting with attending Shabbat dinners with a diverse set of guests, and gradually questioning his identification with the white nationalist movement, Black ended up renouncing white supremacy and became an antiracist educator.

While most teachers probably won't see themselves in either Black or Cummings, most should recognize that they associate with white norms, which makes it possible to act in racist ways, [according](#) to writer and education consultant Jamie Utt. Consequently, teachers can uproot racism by counteracting the ways whiteness shows up in the classroom. They can do this by educating themselves about culturally responsive teaching; establishing deeper connections with their students; asking students and families what they want to learn; and not making [white norms the standard](#).

Black history should not reify oppression or confirm what people of color already know: enslavement was a brutal practice then and racism in the classroom is cruel now. You don't have to teach children what it feels like to be a slave. Teach students something that schools and universities have yet to dedicate significant time to — understanding the mind of the oppressor and strategies to counter those beliefs.

This story was produced by [The Hechinger Report](#), a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Read more about [education in New Orleans](#).

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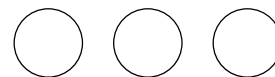
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